

“Toadal” Response Taken to Amphibian Rescue *continued from page -23*

Using vegetation growing along the AEF as miniature bridges the toadlets had been able to breach the barrier. In a few areas, where it is independent of the standard wildlife fence, the AEF had been damaged by falling tree branches allowing the toadlets to access the highway. Temporary repairs to these sections were completed by the Rest Area Rangers, using weed eater wire.

Then it was then a matter of checking and emptying the traps. An estimated 6,600 toadlets were rescued from the traps and tens of thousands more directed to the cross culverts, as intended in the original design.

Our toadal response to getting these amphibians to safety was a success! ♦



Pictured right: Rest Area Rangers Mike Bateman and Carly Janusson on toadlet rescue mission, alongside amphibian exclusion fencing.

Toad on the Road II – The Sequel

Submitted by Len Sielecki, Environmental Issues Analyst

A lot has happened since August 2007, when an estimated one million Western Toads began migrating across Highway 19 on Vancouver Island. Last summer’s nationally publicized event occurred near Pup Creek, just north of Courtenay. The migration, unpredicted by extensive pre-construction environmental assessments and unprecedented in ministry history, caught everyone off guard.

Although anticipated at its onset to only last a week, last summer’s toad migration continued for over 13 weeks. During that period, approximately 950,000 toads were saved and transferred across the highway by the ministry’s toad salvage operations. From highway lane closures and managing numerous volunteers, to answering media inquiries and catching buckets of toads, the ministry’s Courtenay District Office staff were instrumental in the ministry’s efforts to save the toads.

After toad migration finally subsided, extensive debriefings were held with ministry staff, wildlife consultants, and representatives from BC Hydro and TimberWest, the major landowners in the area, to determine what happened. The debriefings gave the ministry great insight into the toad migration and how to deal with any unexpected future migrations. To follow up, I developed a wildlife migration response protocol for the ministry.

Until recently, everything was quiet – or at least it seemed to be. Earlier this summer, as a pre-emptive measure, the ministry hired Elke Wind, Canada’s leading Western Toad expert, to conduct a toad population



A toad handling guide is being written for the ministry by Canada’s leading Western Toad expert.

survey near Pup Creek. The ministry wanted to know how many toads could be expected this summer so preparations could be made in advance if another mass migration was likely. It was a great relief, when Elke’s report indicated that toad numbers were very low in the Pup Creek area and no large migration was predicted.

Well, once again, Mother Nature did the unexpected. I was just arranging for a toad population survey at Keddy Swamp,

near the Hamm Road intersection on Highway 19, when it happened. At 7:54 a.m., on Thursday, July 31, Sue Pauwels, Executive Coordinator, Office of the Assistant Deputy Minister, Highways Department, fielded the first call from a member of the public, advising that toads were starting to approach the highway just south of Hamm Road. The toads were migrating three weeks earlier than anyone expected.

When I got Sue’s email about the toad migration, I was busy working on an urgent request from the Premier’s office, due later that day. Oh, it was a great time to have a toad migration land on my desk! But, the toads were on the move, so things had to happen fast. The ministry’s wildlife migration response protocol was put into action for the first time. With Sue alerting the ministry’s Courtenay District Office, my job was finding a Western Toad expert. I called Elke Wind and asked her to assess the migration and provide the ministry guidance. Luckily, Elke was available, and she headed out right away.

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As soon as I got off the phone with Elke, I got a call from Lisanne Bowness, Senior Public Affairs Officer, with the Public Affairs Bureau. Nothing stirs the public's interest like a toad migration. Consequently, Lisanne was inundated with calls from the media. An hour hadn't passed since the ministry got its first call about the toads, and news reporters were already looking for information about the migration, with camera crews preparing to visit the migration site.

The timing of the toad migration didn't make anything any easier, as the August long weekend was quickly approaching. Elke was only available for three days, and finding a suitably experienced professional to replace her wasn't possible on such short notice. So, to provide biologist backup for the district office, I started making arrangements to visit the migration site.

Trying to book a room remotely close to Courtenay was a nightmare. After first searching the Internet, and then calling hotels, I found out all rooms in the area were booked for the long weekend. Finally, when I called the Courtenay Travelodge a second time after dinner, I mentioned to the front desk person that I was part of the ministry's effort to save the toads. Suddenly, there was a pause on the other end of the line – then I was told to call back right at 10 p.m. Well, I called back at exactly 10 p.m., to be told a room had just become available!

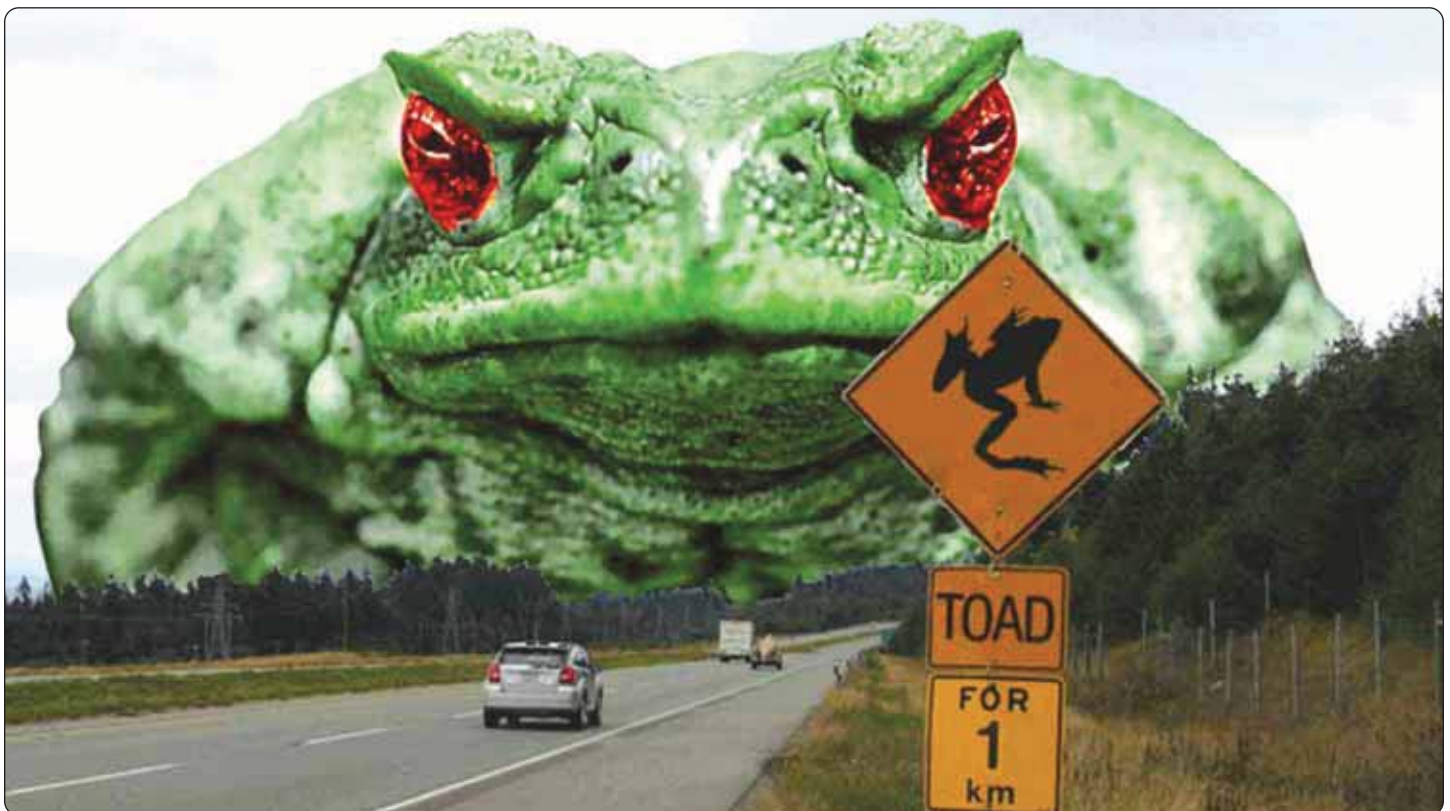
When I checked into the hotel, there was a "No Vacancy" sign prominently posted on the door and a long line of vehicles parked outside with people hoping to get a room. I met the front desk clerk who I'd spoken to earlier, and I told her how much I appreciated her help getting the room. She replied that her

small son had been following the toad migration closely in the newspapers, and then added if I needed a room for a second night, something would be found. I immediately felt like a somebody! Helping the toads made a difference.

Later, when I visited the migration site, everything was working much better than I expected. The district office had the site completely under control. The warning signs and safety cones were in place, the temporary amphibian fencing was constructed and operating as designed, and Rest Area Rangers Carly Janusson, Mike Bateman, Chris Rabbitt and Marlene Leach were busy spending their long weekend collecting buckets of toads and transferring them safely across the highway. The toads were in good hands.

Now that the toad migration near Hamm Road has subsided, the ministry is watching the Pup Creek area closely, keeping an eye on any toads that might decide to migrate there. Special new human access gates are being designed at headquarters, for installation in the wildlife exclusion fencing located along the highway near Hamm Road, to provide easier access to the amphibian fencing. A Western Toad handling guide is being written by Elke so ministry staff can be more knowledgeable and better prepared to handle the creatures.

Like most sequels, this summer's toad migration is not the media blockbuster that last year's migration was. The district office's fast and effective response eliminated the potential for toad chaos and drama. This year, there weren't throngs of spectators, reporters and camera crews stopping alongside the highway and running into each other in the ditches. Life for the toads is peaceful again, as it should be at the end of any sequel. ♦



Another summer blockbuster sequel to last year's event on Highway 19.

Photo creation by Ministry Graphics Section.